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Complexity, accent and conviviality

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Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 26

Complexity, accent and conviviality: Concluding comments

by

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AAAL 2012, Boston, Panel on “Constructing identities in transnational spaces” (Anna De Fina & Sabina Perrino, convenors)

Complexity, accent and conviviality:

Concluding comments

Jan Blommaert

The Panel:

Anna De Fina: Radio broadcast as transactional space: the creation and negotiation of identities in and through Spanish language radio in the U.S.

Sabina Perrino: Veneto out of Italy? Dialect, Migration, and Transnational Identity

Stanton Wortham & Catherine Rhodes: The Emergent Identity of a Young Immigrant: A Multi-scale Analysis

Li Wei & Zhu Hua: Translanguaging in universities and beyond: Multilingual practices of Chinese students of different backgrounds

Zane Goebel: Indonesians doing togetherness in Japan

Elaine Chun: Reading Asian embodiments of Blackness on Youtube.

I must open with an emphatic thanks to the presenters in this panel; they offered me a collection of papers of exceptional quality that prompted me to reflect again on issues that I find tremendously relevant.¹

¹ I also wish to thank my partners in the International Consortium on Language and Superdiversity (INCOLAS) and the Max Planck Research Group on Sociolinguistic Diversity for crucial input and continuous discussion on these themes. I thus thank Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris, Jens-Normann Jørgensen, Adrian Blackledge, Sirpa Leppänen, Max Spotti, Rob Moore, Cécile Vigouroux and, especially, Karel Arnaut and David Parkin for either knocking or massaging these ideas into my head.

Towards complexity

For one thing, the papers document, as well as stimulate, the gradual recognition of the fact that the contemporary semiotics of culture and identity need to be captured in terms of *complexity* rather than in terms of *multiplicity* or *plurality*. “Multi”-frames offer us very little purchase – a vocabulary including “multi-lingual”, “multi-cultural” or “pluri-“, “inter-“, “cross-“ and “trans-“ notions all suggest an a priori existence of separable units (language, culture, identity), and they suggest that the *encounter of such separable units produces peculiar new units*: “multilingual” repertoires, “mixed” or “hybrid” identities and so forth. Such frames, thus, suggest that the strange and unfamiliar features of globalization and superdiversity only occur *in the zones of contact* between different units – while such units remain ontologically intact and can still be defined and identified in singular terms. We still see ‘English’ and ‘Spanish’, ‘Mandarin’ or ‘Javanese’ *encountering* other, equally ontologically singular units. The term ‘code-switching’ emblemizes this view: two distinct ‘codes’ are involved in patterns of shifting and mixing.

A complexity perspective, on the other hand, suggests that the real work of creation and innovation – the real dynamics of language, culture and identity – is done *inside* such units. It is not just the contact between, say, ‘English’ and ‘Spanish’ that creates new hybrid forms; in the course of such processes, both English and Spanish *themselves* are changed and reconfigured, and participants walk away from such encounters with fundamentally changed repertoires. Such repertoires will afterwards be deployed in all forms of communication – ‘cross-cultural’ or not, according to the classic definitions. It is the *semiotic system itself* that is affected by globalization and superdiversity; the mobilization of people, their repertoires and practices affects the *totality* of the sociolinguistic (or socio-semiotic) economies in and through which they move. The ‘mixed’ speech of teenagers intensely engaged in globalized semiotic work through social media, gaming and so forth, influences and is rapidly adopted by these kids’ parents too – even if the level of activity in such hybrid spaces and hybridizing practices of the parents is significantly inferior to that of their kids. Access to different scales, and incorporation of cultural material from a variety of scales, creates conditions in which earlier dyadic distinctions such as ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ no longer appear to function well, as Worthan and Rhodes correctly argue.

In such a view, a term such as ‘code-switching’ is hardly an accurate descriptor of what goes on. We see, in actual fact, perpetual processes of creative *coding*, of the continuous production of new codes not – at least sociolinguistically – in any salient way tied to ‘languages’ in the classic sense of the term; Sharma & Rampton (2011) use the notion of ‘lectal focusing’ instead: participants focus meaningfully and in a nonrandom way on specific resources in a repertoire that is, fundamentally, ‘hybridized’, multiscalar and shot through with relatively unpredictable and unstable patterns of stratified indexical orderliness. Topics can trigger foci on specific resources – ‘Standard English’ versus ‘Gujarati’ resources, for instance – and topic shifts involve a whole array of shifts in footing, subjective orientation, participant framework, intensity of interactional engagement, authority and so on.

Scholars have during the past decade expressed their uneasiness with the classic – call it Newtonian, or, by proxy, Fishmanian – sociolinguistic framework, and terms such as ‘crossing’, ‘linguaging’, ‘translinguaging’, ‘polylinguaging’, ‘truncated multilingualism’, ‘metrolingualism’, ‘transidioma’, or ‘heritaging’ all signal an epistemological rupture with past approaches (see Blommaert & Rampton 2011 for a survey). For Jørgensen and his associates (2011), the best way of describing what goes on in superdiverse talk is by using the neutral term ‘features’ as the elementary unit. People learn, acquire and deploy *resources*, some of which are conventionally (that is, ideologically) attributed to ‘a language’ such as Danish, while others are part of recognizable indexical orders such as genres, styles, registers, jargons and so forth. A statement on ‘language’ such as, e.g. “the kids speak Danish”, is an *a posteriori* descriptive assessment derived from plausibility and approximation, not a categorical input *a priori*. We now realize that *language in actual fact only appears by degree*, in the shape of approximations of something we always imagined as stable, ‘complete’ and constant. And the overall patterns of activity can never be clearly predicted on the basis of what we know about ‘languages’ or established genres, registers and so on – it is fundamentally creative, and it always produces something entirely new within the bandwidth of the sociolinguistic or socio-semiotic economies in which participants dwell. Note that, thus, creativity can not be seen anymore the way we saw it until now: as *special*. It is simply the default mode of production of what we call, by lack as yet of better words, ‘language’ – hence ‘linguaging’.

Clearly, this “nano-sociolinguistic” (as David Parkin 2012 calls it) or “post-Fishmanian” turn involves a wide range of fundamental reorientations, both regarding basic descriptive notions (such as ‘language’, ‘culture’ and ‘identity’) and regarding socio-semiotic practices in contemporary contexts. If we accept mobility as an elementary and defining feature of social interaction, profoundly affecting what precedes communicative events, the events themselves as well as the outcomes of such events, we find ourselves in new and uncharted theoretical and methodological territories. Immutable and nondynamic units can no longer be seen as adequate instruments for our work; and, thus, we cannot avoid the terribly frustrating exercise of getting rid of the colossal legacy of structuralism in our fields of study.

I recognize all of this in the papers presented in this panel. The title of this panel already points to the acceptance of mobility and mobility potential as defining the processes we observe; in Wortham & Rhodes’ paper, complexity is the central theme. In Perrino’s paper on the new political prominence of the Veneto dialect in Italy, I was struck by the way in which what looks like a strictly ‘local’ or ‘regional’ phenomenon is actually reconstructed and indexically re-loaded *precisely because of cross-scalar mobility* in the context of national and European politics. The case of the Veneto dialect cannot be seen in isolation. Its propagandists inscribe themselves in what has by now become a global scenario of ‘minorities’ whose uniqueness and authenticity are strengthened *precisely* because of its currency as an export-product, so to speak, in which the dialect gains wider circulation and entirely different audiences elsewhere. The ‘cultural heritage’, to adopt an old term, is strengthened, deepened, functionally rebranded – in short *changed* – because of its usage in non-local fora and in functions that are not those of the ‘authentic’ semiotic ecology – such as national or European politics. Access to and circulation on different scales brings material of these different scales into the sign itself – Veneto dialect, thus, *also* becomes a *Europeanized* vernacular, not just a local one.

The opposite move is described in Chun’s paper, where we see how a global script of ‘blackness’ in HipHop is enacted by Asian American youngsters who, in doing so, create and shape their own locally anchored variety of a global frame, a dialect of a supervernacular if you wish (Blommaert 2011), after which they bring this localized variety into global circulation. The pattern is complex, as it involves a global template which is ‘deglobalized’ by turning it into an Asian American ‘dialect’, which is then

‘reglobalized’ again in a system of circulation that involves large parts of the world and huge new online communities – ‘supergroups’ if you wish, ‘speech communities’ in which orders of indexicality are effectively shared and, therefore, codes of meaningful recognizability are jointly deployed, while these communities lack almost any feature of traditional organic (i.e. local) speech communities. They also orient towards objects in which language is just one element: we are talking about Youtube music clips here, densely multimodal messages that have rapidly acquired a range of intriguing discursive and social features (they can be used as ‘answers’ to questions in chat interaction or Facebook communication, for instance), defying our common understanding of communication as dominated by language.

We consequently only have clumsy terms to describe this as yet – “inauthentic” is the term that comes up in Chun’s paper. But the Europeanized Veneto discourse is as ‘inauthentic’ as any other globally scripted and locally enacted cultural pattern – as inauthentic as most of today’s culture in general perhaps. Might ‘unstable’, ‘evolving’ or ‘unfinished’ be better descriptors? Perhaps, but we would soon start realizing that almost everything we see, hear and observe is profoundly ‘unfinished’, ‘evolving’ and ‘unstable’. Our vocabulary quickly lets us down, because we begin to see another default mode of occurrence of cultural forms moving across different scales and through different mediating channels: never finished and polished, always ‘under construction’ and rough on the edges. What was until recently considered deviant and exceptional (and not really of analytic interest) suddenly becomes normal, and our vocabularies haven’t yet followed this leap in our awareness.

These cases nonetheless illustrates the compelling salience of complexity as a perspective: the Veneto ‘authenticity’ *changes* and becomes stronger as well as significantly more complex because of the scalar mobility phenomena that dominate the public sphere. And ‘blackness’ is changed by being ‘brought down’, so to speak, to a very non-black local environment. The Veneto dialect *has changed* internally due to its translocal and transnational usage. Wortham & Rhodes thus find support for their own analysis in Perrino’s case analysis, and observe how in both cases, we see how micro- or ‘nano’- analysis demands considerations of various translocal scales into the analysis. In order to get the nano-stuff right, we need to look at the global stuff as well; contextualization acquires a new vocabulary and methodology here.

‘Heritagizing’ and culture as accent

This also illustrates a wider phenomenon: the perpetual semiotic reorientations of identity work. It is striking to see how often the term ‘authenticity’ is used in a wide variety of social domains nowadays. We have to be ‘authentic’ in almost every aspect of our lives, including (and most prominently) in and through our consumption behavior. Observing such discourses and patterns in a variety of globalized and polycentric contexts, my colleague Piia Varis and I came up a little while ago with a framework for describing these strange and highly dynamic patterns of identity work oriented towards ‘authenticity’, while ‘authenticity’ itself is obviously a moving target (Blommaert & Varis 2011). Varis and I used four heuristic elements; let me summarize them and use them as a spectre for looking at the papers:

1. Identity discourses and practices can be described as discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen (or can be seen) as emblematic of particular identities. These features can be manifold and include artefacts, styles, forms of language, places, times, forms of art or aesthetics, ideas and so forth.
2. To be more precise, we will invariably encounter specific arrangements or configurations of such potentially emblematic features. The features rarely occur as a random or flexible complex; when they appear they are presented (and oriented towards) as ‘essential’ combinations of features that reflect, bestow and emphasize ‘authenticity’.
3. We will inevitably encounter different degrees of fluency in enregistering these discursive orientations. Consequently, identity practices will very often include stratified distinctions between ‘experts’ and ‘novices’, ‘teachers’ and ‘learners’, and ‘degrees’ of authenticity. In this respect, we will see an implicit benchmark being applied: ‘enoughness’. One has to ‘have enough’ of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category.
4. Obviously, these processes involve conflict and contestation, especially revolving around ‘enoughness’ (s/he is *not enough* of X; or *too much* of X) as well as about the particular configurations of emblematic features (‘in order to

be X, you need to have 1,2,3,4 and 5' versus 'you can't be X without having 6, 7, 8, 9'). And given this essentially contested character, these processes are highly dynamic: configurations of features and criteria of enoughness can be adjusted, reinvented, amended.

The upshot of these four points is that what is commonly understood as 'culture', also in the sense of 'identity', is empirically best seen as 'accent': small inflections – 'big enough' however – of conventional patterns and templates (Blommaert & Varis 2012). So, rather than as a massive constellation of 'authentic' features, people in actual fact build and articulate their identities through *mixing conventional and enregistered frameworks with small bits of deviant, 'unique' materials*. Identity, consequently, is in *details* and not in the big stuff (even with the Asian-American kids doing Black). And these details are used in highly complex activities in which linguistic-interactional work is mediated and organized in relation to objects, commodities, customs, particular spaces and other material, institutional and ideological objects. Various 'microhegemonies' are blended here in fundamentally polycentric events – in which, thus, a variety of normative complexes are involved – and observe that even the deviation, the creation of a unique 'accent', can be rule-governed. People express their uniqueness, the difference they wish to express between themselves and others in the same category, by reference to recognizable formats. Subcultures are as normatively rigorous as so-called mainstream cultures and patterns of enregisterment – the construction of orders of indexicality – are not just common there too, but required as a measure to distinguish between 'weird but OK, and thus one of us' and 'completely weird, and thus not one of us'.

We see this clearly in the papers by Chun, Goebel and De Fina. In these three cases, identity work is oriented towards and 'templated' by, so to speak, mass media – TV in Goebel's paper, Youtube in Chun's work and radio in De Fina's analysis. I will return to Goebel's argument later. De Fina emphasizes how "transnational identities are characterized by the use and appropriation (at times conscious and at times enacted) of cultural resources that belong to different communities and places" – a specific 'Latino-ness' articulated through an ordered range of specific features fused with the conventional frames of 'radio broadcasting'. The Washington-Baltimore based radio station is no doubt recognizably 'American' – part of a 'mainstream culture' of recognizable radio-broadcasting templates – and recognizably different from e.g.

Mexican or Colombian radio stations. A well-dosed infusion of ‘Latino’ stuff forms the creative blend that produces ‘authenticity’ as an identifiable Latino radio station in a specific region in the US. The ‘stuff’ itself is heterogeneous: there is Spanish, of course, but there are also specific topics, specific people and specific discourses of identity. All together, they produce ‘enough’ authenticity – that is, a recognizably adequate degree of ‘fluency’ in enregistering the emblems of Latino-in-the Washington-area authenticity. Evidently the impressive circulation of Chun’s Asian-American Blackness clips on Youtube underscores all of this, and the heterogeneity there is even more abundant and exuberant than on radio El Zol.

Li Wei and Zhu Hua’s data offer further evidence of this. The Chinese-heritage kids they investigate explicitly address the particular ‘doses’ of ‘Chineseness’ they recognize as constructive of a recognizable category of ‘Chinese’, and they assess and appraise their degree of fit into such categories. Their discourse is pervaded by orientations to what we called ‘enoughness’: I don’t have enough Mandarin, I’m not entirely Chinese, I have to work on acquiring more Chineseness, and so forth. The quest, there too, is for *the right mix*, not for categorical insertion in clear-cut and bounded categories (even if the issue is often framed as such: *either* Chinese or British – we are familiar with the impact of totalizing and categorical ideological templates on identity discourses; see Li et al 2012 for similar findings).

What we observe here as well as in de Fina’s and Perrino’s paper, is something we can call “heritaging” (see Van der Aa 2012). There appears to be no *point zéro* for the authenticity pursued (and claimed) by the participants; no one, consequently, is *completely* or *perfectly* Latino, Veneto or Chinese. The ‘heritage stuff’ compiled and deployed by the participants is

- (a) a small selection of cultural material conventionally (that is: emblematically) associated with the ‘ideal’ identities (which is why Agha 2007 emphasizes the *stereotypical* nature of enregisterment);
- (b) and the blending and playing-off of such emblematic materials in practices and discourses of enactment that are by their very nature hybrid and ‘non-authentic’, if you wish.

There is thus no way in which these people can just ‘climb into’ a well-defined and transparently policed ‘heritage’ that would provide ‘full authenticity’. What we see are practices of creation and modulation of heritage *in relation to very different forms of identities* and with creative, evolving and ‘unfinished’ blends as outcomes – heritage as a verb, in other words, as ‘heritaging’. And this ‘heritaging’ occurs in a fundamentally polycentric environment in which the constraints and affordances of repertoires are played out in relation to different conflicting and complementary micro-hegemonies.

I am not convinced that such processes are consigned to ‘special’ moments of hybridizing creativity, as suggested by Li Wei and Zhu Hua. As mentioned earlier, I have the impression that such moments are a default occurrence across the whole spectre of communicative and identity practices. There can be *more* or *less* of it, but never *none* of it. I also do not think, consequently, that such processes only characterize the behavior of contemporary populations – we now see them and now recognize them as salient, largely due to the increasing sophistication of our analytic tools, but there is no reason to believe that identity work was less complex in earlier times (witness how parents adapt to their children’s practices – transgenerational dynamics run in both directions). I propose to see polycentricity as a feature of *any* social event, and the complex manoeuvring we called ‘heritaging’ as a default feature of *any* form of identity work. (This could help us get rid of some of the more unfortunate legacies of postmodernism – the ‘fluidism’ often ascribed to contemporary identities; complexity is not the absence of order, it is the presence of a complex, non-categorical, non-equilibrium and nonlinear form of order).

Conviviality

I announced that I would return to Zane Goebel’s excellent paper. On the one hand, we see all the points discussed here in the analysis of Indonesians in Japan: there is the creative deployment and negotiation (“navigation”, often called in contemporary work) of an Indonesian “authenticity”, mediated by a TV-show that provokes intricate orientations to emblematic authenticity ‘stuff’. Goebel, like the other presenters here, emphasizes that identity work is performed in complex material and immaterial settings, in which language is but one element. We already saw this when we discussed Chun’s paper on Youtube clips: what we observe is a semiotic array or

constellation, not just self-contained ‘conversation’ or ‘talk’, and space and mobility across spaces are crucial in capturing this. The fact that the events observed by Goebel take place in Japan and not in Jakarta, for instance, is as relevant to understand what happens as the fact that de Fina’s El Zol station operates out of The US eastcoast, not Mexico City or La Paz.

The interest I have in Goebel’s argument has to do with the ‘phatic’ character of a lot of what goes on in these data – a contrast with Chun’s focus on the exuberant and spectacular display of ‘inauthentic’ blackness on Youtube. Goebel observes his participants collaborating in what he calls “the pursuit of social sameness”. This is interesting: people here perform a low-intensity and apparently low-salience form of interaction tailored towards a sense of commonness, articulated in a kind of symbolic rehearsal of emblematic features of ‘authenticity’ – emblematic word forms and meanings, registers and patterns of discourse.

It brings me to a notion which I find increasingly productive in understanding identity processes in a globalizing and superdiverse environment: *conviviality*. We have for decades been accustomed to see human interaction as organized towards *important* things: propositional meanings, indexical stances, identity or subject positions. This restricted our gaze towards single instances of interaction with clearly identifiable participants making clearly identifiable moves with clearly identifiable outcomes. (Clever ones have spotted already that I am referring to particular branches of conversation analysis and discourse analysis here).

In doing that we have produced very rich insights into the dynamics of such small-scale processes and their outcomes. But we may also have overlooked or neglected some big things: the fact that a lot of what people do, they do in “the pursuit of happiness”, for reasons not more precise or elevated than merely to be happy, to avoid having to perpetually play for big stakes, to feel good, and to give others similar feelings. The general *ambiance* of communication – and its important effects on how we organize it functionally – has often been overlooked or treated as just the ‘key’, the ‘general background’ in which certain interactions take place. Goebels’ relaxed participants are cosily watching an Indonesian soap while they produce *badinage* which, at least from what I see in the data, is not too tense, not too concerned with specific issues or pressing identity problems that demand a solution here-and-now.

They produce *relaxed* identity work, focused on “the pursuit of sameness”, that nice feeling of being a community in a foreign context.

This insight is easy to downplay, but I would encourage everyone to take it seriously: a lot of what people do in identity work is – in spite of its tremendous complexity and the phenomenal amount of skills that enter into it – *not dramatic*, not problematic, not something that overly worries them. It is ‘iterative’ work in the sense of Derrida, a repetitive routine or ritual in which we engage in creative constructions of ourselves and our partners *that make sense* without making a difference. Most people do not seem to have too many problems with who they are – in spite of the authenticity hysteria perpetually produced by consumerism and Facebook. (A long time ago, discussing then-recent work by Myers-Scotton on code-switching, John Gumperz said to me with his signature broad grin: “Jan, most people know perfectly well who they are in conversation”).

This does not make such identity processes less salient or interesting – quite the contrary is true. It is not because processes are *not* dramatic or *not* high-intensity performances that they carry less information about the political sociology of identities in the contemporary work. And we will not stop learning massively important things about how people live and behave when data are not spectacular nor instances of acute conflict. It is the habitual, low-key, routine and ritual of identity work that shows us – amazingly – how complicated and dynamic the demands are on such work in *any* instance, even if the work is performed just “in the pursuit of sameness”. Ben Rampton has never failed warning us against over-dramatization of identity work, often emphasizing that the really relevant things happen *sotto voce* or on the backburner, while they still speak to the persistence of massive patterns of social order such as ethnic, gender or social class distinctions (e.g. Rampton 2006). We may be able now to look at a lot of what happens on Facebook, Youtube and other social media – a veritable and incredibly hyped earthquake of identity work – as forms of conviviality rather than as a new era of identity warfare.

The balance between what is mundane and what is spectacular is absolutely relevant: it defines the genres in which people operate and the ways in which such genres define the “social spheres” that Bakhtin saw as elementary for understanding social and political life. Thus, whether identity work is performed in the company of one’s

spouse or best friends, as opposed to in front of a police officer, a school teacher or a medical doctor *matters*, if only because we see how what has been ‘rehearsed’ in relaxing contexts, so to speak, can (and must) be activated in specific configurations when identities become the chips in a high-stakes game.

Even more, we can now see how *histories of identity performance* are among the crucial resources people need to be able to draw upon when identities really matter. I have learned this lesson working on African asylum seekers in Europe whose ‘life stories’ lacked the traces of intense cycles of rehearsals and were therefore institutionally rejected as false (Blommaert 2001) and when working on the autobiographies of a man from Congo, who appeared to lack the ‘archive’ of life-narratives that enable many of us to construct a fluent, linear and coherent story of who we are – a Facebook Timeline life (Blommaert 2008). Goebels’ Indonesians in Japan are involved, I would suggest, in a moment of ‘identity rehearsal’, shaping, developing and fine-tuning resources they can and must deploy in less relaxed contexts as well. Voice, as we call it, is grounded in histories of practice, and such histories must be described by means of relevant distinctions between different conditions for the production and articulation of meaning-making resources.

Coda: speculative thinking wanted

The work reported in this panel fits in what we can by now consider a paradigm shift in sociolinguistics,

- (1) away from the linguistic bias originally carried along in the discipline, and towards a sociolinguistics that attempts to understand society, not just language;
- (2) recognizing language as one element in a richer and more faceted configuration of multimodal semiotic resources deployed in events;
- (3) where such events themselves are more richly contextualized than before, involving scalar phenomena and trajectories of cross-scale mobility.

By doing that, they engage in

- (4) fundamental theory-constructive work on cultural complexity that far transcends older paradigms of plurality and multiplicity, and such work

(5) enables us to develop a lens by means of which we can look at new data as well as reanalyze older ones. It enables us to think paradigmatically, in other words, and not just theoretically.

Take these five points together, and we get a glimpse of a different sociolinguistic world. That world is messy and appears, at first sight, uncomfortably chaotic, because most of our well-tried structuralist and modernist benchmarks can no longer be profitably applied to it. Wortham & Rhodes justly reminded us several times of that in their paper. The job ahead is to detect the different forms of order in this mess, to recognize the unfinished and evolving, tentative, nonlinear aspects of social and cultural life not as peripheral and exceptional, but as *normal* features of life. What we used to see as the margins of social life might very well prove to be its center. The work of imagination is crucial here, of finding an accurate imagery and a set of adequate metaphors that enable us to see this world more sharply. It is time for imaginative and speculative thinking and re-thinking in sociolinguistics.

I guess I have said enough at this point; there is much more to say and it is a measure of the quality and coherence of the papers in this panel that they prompt lengthy reflections on a range of pretty important issues. This work has sharpened my own understanding of things, brought certain points intuitively felt into a more developed shape, and it has taught me several things. I have learned a lot, so thank you to all the presenters here for offering me the privilege to enter into discussion with such rich and productive work.

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